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# Mauritian Literature versus the Cambridge International Education System

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Honors Thesis  
Mauritian Literature vs the CIE Literature Curriculum

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## Introduction to Thesis

This thesis was constructed more out of a selfish desire for self-discovery than for proposing solutions to literary problems. In truth, I planned to include Mauritian literature in my thesis two years ago because I was convinced it would give me further insight into Mauritian culture. I may be Mauritian through my family, but I have not spent extensive time there.

I began this project thinking to find a conclusive list of must-read Mauritian authors. I was quickly disabused of this notion. As Mauritius is such a small country, there are very few authors who have made an impact on the global literary scene. On top of that, Mauritian literature is not a general subject of study among Mauritian students, further complicating the development of a cohesive literary movement. Consequentially, the Mauritian literature explored in this thesis is limited to two texts, spanning the 18<sup>th</sup> to the 21<sup>st</sup> century. I could have included Mauritian poetry but I decided to limit myself to novels for the sake of analytical uniformity.

As for the public Mauritian education system, which follows the Cambridge International Education (CIE) plan, I selected works from O and A level syllabi for 2018-2019 for the sake of relevance. However, it should be noted that the CIE tends to recycle texts, therefore some of the authors analyzed here will still be relevant past 2019, likely including Jane Austen, Athol Fugard, and William Shakespeare. The analysis of the CIE works is split into two sections—Western literature and the International literature. Although western literature has a slight advantage over international literature in the education system, the CIE does a creditable job in including a variety of English-language texts from around the world.

The motivating issue that drove me to compare Mauritian literature and the public literary education system is my fascination at the fact that the school system is British while the majority of popular Mauritian literature is written in French, with a burgeoning subgroup of works written

in Mauritian Kreol. I cannot explain the divide, and many Mauritian students do study French language and (limited) literature, but I seek to show that Mauritians should be interested in their own literature and that they should actively question their British education.

### **Where is Mauritius?**

Mauritius is a small island located in the Indian Ocean, lying roughly 500 miles east of Madagascar. It forms part of the Mascarene Islands chain, named after 16<sup>th</sup> CE Portuguese sailor Pedro de Mascarenhas, and is a volcanic island. Although Mauritius' volcano is inactive, the volcano of fellow Mascarene Island Réunion is active. Mauritius fame rests in its status as a popular tourist destination due to its mild weather, beaches, and luxury hotels, but it is also known for its sugar and tea exports.<sup>1</sup>

### **Why does Mauritius merit interest?**

Mauritius' primary differentiation from other islands stems from its unique population. Because the island is volcanic, there are no human natives. The mixing of various ethnicities produced an island with a variety of cultural, linguistic, and ancestral ties.

The first major conquerors to arrive on Mauritius were the Dutch between 1638 and 1710. They tried, and failed, to maintain a lasting colony, but they did succeed in causing the extinction of the island's unique bird, the dodo. The first successful conquerors of the island were the French, through the French East India Company. They established their rule between 1715 and 1810, and brought in African slaves and some Chinese and Malay populations to work on the sugar plantations.<sup>2</sup> The French are the reason that most Mauritians speak creole, a

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<sup>1</sup> "Mauritius," *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, 2018, <https://www.britannica.com/place/Mauritius>

<sup>2</sup> "Mauritius," *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, 2018, <https://www.britannica.com/place/Mauritius>

language based on French and corrupted through the introduction of various languages and pronunciations. Due to France's importation of labor to Mauritius, we have black Mauritians, mixed (also called mulatto) Mauritians, and Chinese Mauritians.

By 1810, the English conquered Mauritius, partly for its convenient location but mostly because French privateers had been attacking English ships from Mauritius. Unlike with most of their colonies, the British decided not to interfere with the French cultural, linguistic, and legal system on the island. Notably, they did abolish slavery in 1835 and, as a substitute, began enticing Indians to come to Mauritius as indentured servants. They brought over so many Indian slave-replacements that approximately 67% of Mauritius' current population are descended from these immigrants. By the 1920s, the indentured servitude system stopped and, in 1968, Mauritius became a republic.<sup>3</sup>

The most important cultural legacy from the British is Mauritius' Indo-Pakistani majority and its public education system. Given that they left untouched the influence of French language and culture, it is understandable that French became the language of the cultured, while English the language of government and politics. Even today, parents prefer to teach their children French as a first language instead of English or Kreol. English is usually left for the public education system and after-school tutoring. Furthermore, I would argue that French indicates cultural refinement because many of the Europeans who have lived in Mauritius for generations come from French ancestry. The development of an elite class tied to French culture and education is the logical beginning for the perception that a refined understanding of French concurrently indicates a cultured family.

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<sup>3</sup> "Mauritius," *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, 2018, <https://www.britannica.com/place/Mauritius>

## Mauritian Literature

Speaking from experience, my family members who seem most aware of Mauritian literature are consistently the individuals who speak French at home, and who encourage the study of French language and literature in their children. The majority of my family does not heavily emphasize French outside of schoolwork and, as such, most only know of Mauritian literature through independent study, through their jobs as teachers, or by word of mouth.

Only Saint-Pierre's *Paul et Virginie* (in my list of Mauritian novels) can be counted upon to be well-known among Mauritians, for reasons I explain in my first essay. However, having been written in the late 18<sup>th</sup> century, *Paul et Virginie* is a dated text more attuned to French socio-cultural commentary than to Mauritian realities. Despite this, Saint-Pierre's text does justice to the topography and flora of the island and can be relied upon as a study of Mauritius' relative conservation of nature.

I wanted to review Nathacha Appanah's *Le Dernier Frère* as it covers a little known period of Mauritian history, while under British rule, when the UK government shipped migrating Jews from the outskirts of a newly created Israel to a former prison in the north of Mauritius. These Jews were eventually brought back to Israel, but their exile in Mauritius forms part of both their diasporic heritage and their helplessness in the face of British discrimination. Despite this, I decided to focus on works I thought people my age had a higher chance of reading. As Nathacha Appanah is not part of the CIE curriculum for French literature, students would encounter her novels primarily through their home environment or, perhaps, if they attend French schools in Mauritius. For this reason, I shifted my attention to exploring Dev Virahsawmy as the figurative father of Kreol literature. He is one of the first Mauritians to standardize Kreol spelling and to write about current Mauritian socio-economic issues and

politics in his literature. As a large amount of the population speaks Kreol on a daily basis, I propose that a strong likelihood exists of students warming to Dev Virahsawmy's writing faster than to Nathacha Appanah's novels.

Should *Paul et Virginie* be Mauritius' Claim to Fame?



*Paul et Virginie* is an inescapable part of Mauritius. There are sculptures depicting the titular characters at various government, tourist, and historic buildings in Port Louis and at the locations mentioned in the novel. Until recently, there was a sculpture of the young couple in the Pamplemousses Garden, a major tourist attraction. Because of its artistic presence, Mauritians know the story of *Paul et Virginie*, even if they have never read the actual book.

However, times are changing in Mauritius. While it is true that Bernardin de Saint-Pierre's novel may be known to the francophone world, Mauritius now gets more tourists that do not belong to this demographic. As they cannot be expected to pick up on this literary reference, the artistic representations of the young Paul and Virginia lose their wonder. The big question now is whether *Paul et Virginie* should be preserved as the first novel written about Mauritius or whether the work of a French botanist advocating for simpler lifestyles should fall into obscurity.

Saint-Pierre's *Paul et Virginie* was published in France in 1788 and rose to fame in France's literary salon culture. The French *salons* were forums of discussion on scientific, literary, philosophical, moral, and social topics, mostly organized by wealthy aristocratic women. Although *Paul et Virginie* has faded from the popular literary conscious, it is remembered by readers of Flaubert's *Madame Bovary* (1856) because the titular character fantasizes about living in Mauritius after having read Saint-Pierre's novel. Saint-Pierre writes beautifully, both in style and in describing Mauritian nature. His botanical interests, more fully explored in his previous works, shine through in his detailed descriptions of topography and plant life, and readers can attest to his accuracy. On that point, *Paul et Virginie* is faithful to its goal of representing Mauritius; however, there are passages in the text worth analyzing concerning slavery in Mauritius.

Saint-Pierre says that the tale was told to him by an old man wandering around the ruins of two wooden huts surrounded by forest. Saint-Pierre convinces the old man to relate the story of the huts' previous inhabitants. From there, we learn of Marguerite, mother of Paul, and Madame de la Tour, mother of Virginia. Marguerite comes from a family of farmers, and she was seduced, and duped, by a man who promised to marry her yet left her with child. She exiled herself to Mauritius to raise her son and she already lives in one of the huts when Madame de la Tour leaves the city (Port Louis) to find a quiet place in which raise her own child. By contrast, Madame de la Tour comes from a well-established and aristocratic family, but she married beneath her and her husband dies in Madagascar before the baby's birth.

Both women decide to keep one another's company, and they commence their lives together with their newborns and the help of Marguerite's male slave, Domingue, and Madame de la Tour's female slave, Marie. Conveniently, Domingue "was greatly attached to Marguerite" (« il était fort attaché à Marguerite, » 86), and he marries Madame de la Tour's slave out of love (« il aimait passionnément sa femme, » 86). Saint-Pierre has a point to prove with this rosy depiction of an owner-slave relationship; he wants to construct a picture of a societally ignorant life as bliss. In showing two women from opposite ends of society living happily as simple mothers, the authors tout his message of simplicity as the key to restoring humanity's innate generosity.

Fortunately for Saint-Pierre, he wrote this piece both when slavery was accepted and just as French society was being highly criticized – note how he published the book just a year before the French Revolution of 1789. Unfortunately for him, times have changed and his soft depictions of slavery can feel unrealistic and heavily romanticized. One of the more difficult scenes to get through involves a runaway slave begging Virginia to save her from a brutal

master. Saint-Pierre describes the slave as being “a brown slave... scrawny like a skeleton, and with no clothes but some scraps of rags around her lower back” (« une négresse marronne... décharnée comme un squelette, et n’avait pour vêtement qu’un lambeau de serpillière autours des reins, » 92). This slave has wandered around the woods for a month, starving, and avoiding the hunters and dogs sent after her. Saint-Pierre also describes the slave’s body being crisscrossed with deep marks from whip lashings (« son corps sillonné de cicatrices profondes par les coups de fouet qu’elle en avait reçus, » 93). Saint-Pierre makes the reader sympathize with this slave and though Virginia’s desire to help, but then he has the slave say, “I would have drowned myself; but knowing that you live her, I told myself : So long as there are still good white people in this country it is still not time to die” (« Je voulais aller me noyer ; mais sachant que vous demeuriez ici, j’ai dit : Puisqu’il y a encore de bons blancs dans ce pays il ne faut pas encore mourir,» 93). Yet again, this is Saint-Pierre’s attempt to convince his French audience that their society lacks common courtesy; however, be Virginia’s reputation what it may, this phrase smacks the modern reader as unlikely to come from the mouth of a mutilated, starved, runaway slave.

In order to further emphasize his thoughts that society, no matter how repentant, remains blind to its cruelty, his story follows Virginia as she goes to the slave’s owner with the slave to ask him to pardon his runaway property. Saint-Pierre has the slave owner agree, not because he becomes enlightened to his cruelty, but because of his love for Virginia and her “elegance...beautiful blond head...[and] the sweet sound of her voice which trembled like the rest of her body in asking from him his pardon” (« la taille élégante de Virginie, sa belle tête blonde...et le doux son de sa voix, qui tremblait ainsi que tout son corps en lui demandant grâce,» 93). This scene also seems unrealistic, and it comes across as slightly disturbing since

Virginia is barely an adolescent at point. Despite the lack of realism in these two scenes, Saint-Pierre does include a more realistic depiction of slavery.

Paul and Virginia, when returning home from the plantation, get lost in the woods and are found by Domingue. He tells the children that he followed their dog, Fidèle, all the way to the Black River region (where the plantation was located) and that “It was here that I learned from the owner that you had brought back his brown slave to him and that he would grant her a pardon. But what a pardon! He showed me his slave attached, by a chain around her feet, to a block of wood, and with a metal collar around her neck” (« C’est là où j’ai appris d’un habitant que vous lui aviez ramené une négresse marronne, et qu’il vous avait accordé sa grâce. Mais quelle grâce ! Il me l’a montrée attachée, avec une chaîne à pied, à un billot de bois, et avec un collier de fer à trois crochets autour du cou,» 98). I want to say that Saint-Pierre intended to report accurate conditions of slavery here to shock his French readers; but I suspect he thought they would be more surprised by the plantation owner’s idea of “grace” being to re-chain his slave without beating her as opposed to letting her go free.

A critique might say that having the slave go free would also be unrealistic since slaves were considered property and worth good money; however, I counter with the fact that this story’s purpose is to present a fantasy. After their return from the plantation, Paul and Virginia continue to grow into an honest, loving couple and their mothers hope to marry them; but French society interferes through Madame de la Tour’s wealthy French aunt, who feels lonely in France and wants Virginia to come live with her so she can mold her into her heiress. Madame de la Tour, wanting the best for her child, sends Virginia to France where society ridicules her for her perceived ignorance; she tries to persevere by sending Paul letters and seeds which he can plant (since he has a green thumb). But Mauritius is so pure, and French society so corrupt, that the

seeds can never grow no matter how much Paul encourages them. Finally, Madame de la Tour's aunt grows fed up with Virginia and sends her home, but a hurricane hits the ship along the coast of Mauritius. Virginia refuses to take off her layers of clothing in public, preserving her purity to the end, and Paul watches from the coast as she drowns; he withers away and is buried next to her, and both mothers soon pass away as well. This story reads like a romanticized fantasy because no one in the story evolves; Virginia remains pure, Paul remains faithful, Madame de la Tour always wants the best for her daughter, Marguerite supports Paul's feelings, and French society snubs the poor, the virtuous, and the enslaved.

This story can be a treat to read because the depiction of Mauritius, while beautifully done with Saint-Paul's rhythmic sentences describing the layout of the land, the fruits, and the flowers that hang from the bountiful trees, the details play out alongside a flat love story and consistently one-dimensional characters. All the people symbolize something else – Madame de la Tour, Marguerite, Paul, Virginia, the plantation owner, even Marie and Domingue all represent, respectively, a hopeful version of the aristocracy, the French poor, innocence, virtue, French society's cruelty, and a happy coexistence with slaves. Saint-Pierre never intended his character's to have full arcs because his point remained that French society stunted the innocent and the virtuous through its insistence on maintaining rigid rules. The shock value of his story lies in that the four main characters can never attain happiness because their twisted society will never allow it; hence the tale might encourage French readers to reflect on their place in society and what they can do to change it.

In the end, Saint-Pierre focuses on his French readers and wants them to respond by questioning themselves. Mauritians could take this story and adapt the questions to their own society; but I think greater value lies in reading the story to study how islands are fantasized by

non-natives. A recurring joke among islanders who immigrate is that they did not realize the beauty of their island until they left. Islanders even occasionally find themselves dreaming of their home, before returning and remembering to temper their dreams with the reality of familial demands and the socio-economic/political climate of the island. For the most part, Saint-Pierre's novel seemed to be used by his contemporaries, like Flaubert, as an escapist fantasy. The novel became a way for tourists to follow a trail – visit the city, go to the church the mothers attended in Pamplemousses, stroll through the gardens next to the church. Nowadays, the value of *Paul et Virginie* rests in its insight into romanticizing islands – by fantasizing the use of an island as an escape from society, Saint-Pierre helped set up the double-edged sword which both exoticizes islands and creates tourism.

As time goes by, less people are drawn to Mauritius because they know of Saint-Pierre's novel, which is likely the reason why some of the statues have been removed. However, from a literary perspective, the novel remains a marker because it is the first novel written about Mauritius and it made a huge impact on French society circles after its publication in 1788. However, the novel creates a fantasy of living in a fertile place because it neglects to note facts like the oppressive heat, humidity, and mosquitos. It effectively effaces the realities of living on a tiny island in the Southern hemisphere; but I do believe it merits some study as it may have given the island a head start on the “places to visit before you die” tourist list.

## Kreol Literature: The Books We Should Be Reading

*Lenpas Flanbwayan*, which translates to *Flame Tree Lane*, was written by Dev Virahsawmy, the leading proponent of Mauritian Kreol. Although he began his career as an English teacher before going into politics, he started promoting the standardized writing of Kreol in the 1980s. His works in Kreol include poetry, novels, essays, plays, and translations of Western works, like Shakespeare's *Macbeth*. This novella revolves around Bala and Ratna experiencing the transition between tradition and modernity and how they must balance both to create a better life for themselves and the community around them.

In the preface, UCLA professor Françoise Lionnet sums up *Flame Tree Lane* as “a prophetic tale that warns against predatory development, global economic downturns, and the need to be self-reliant.” In detailing the danger of conglomerates, Virahsawmy shows how nostalgia for the past clashes with its traditionally conservative environment and argues that attempting to balance modernity and tradition can lead to the exploitation of Mauritians and their land (which is arguably already happening on the island). Virahsawmy then theorizes on the economic problems that erasing family-owned stores will do, and how this could lead to social unrest and violence. Although the novel ends on a hopeful note, the author posits that the danger of over-development and socio-economic collapse is real; however, writing his ideas in Kreol, thereby making it accessible to all Mauritians, makes me think that he believes this story could become the real-life story of Mauritius.

### **Nostalgia versus Modernity; Conservatism vs Liberalism**

Virahsawmy's description of his protagonist's (Bala's) youth resonates still resonates among many Mauritians today. “The houses with thatched roofs were in the middle of a yard that

had many kinds of trees: lilac, eucalyptus, allspice; and fruit trees too, including mango...jambul, longan, breadfruit, tamarind, papaya, jackfruit” (6). This picture exemplifies the simple-life idealism which many older European writers, such as St. Pierre and Flaubert, reference in their own works critiquing over-complex French society. Island life, with its simple housing and dependence on family-maintained produce, encourages connections with nature and creates a common beginning for the entire population. While Bala belongs to Mauritius’ Indian diaspora, he still notes that near his home, “there was a group of houses where the descendants of freed slaves lived” (6), referencing the mostly peaceful coexistence of various racial subgroups. However, instead of playing into the idealism, Virahsawmy qualifies it with the reality of the past – people grew vegetables and raised animals “in order to make ends meet” (7), not because they wanted to be connected with nature and live simple lives.

At the same time, the men were often laborers and “every morning, lorries would come ... and take them to work in the cane fields and to the factories beyond our turf” (7). This line hints at economic dynamics, namely that Mauritius used to be a colonized nation where much of the land belonged to plantation and factory owners. Virahsawmy goes a step further by directly naming plantation housing: “On the two sides of Main Street, there were clusters of sugar estate housing with names that used to make me dream: Cottage, Mademoiselle Jeanne, Plateau, St. Clair, Mapou, Roche Terre, Belmont” (7). I suspect Virahsawmy wants to draw the reader’s attention to the strain between the reality of poverty and the necessity of self-sufficiency versus the colonial European viewpoint that this lifestyle is a choice. The Western mentality proves its superficiality through the Bala’s daydreaming about the names of the sugar estate housing – just as he dreams about sophisticated housing, Westerners dream about idyllic island life.



Just as Virahsawmy seeks to underscore the colonial vs subaltern struggle of the past, he also highlights the cultural conservatism that nostalgia tends to hide. During Bala's youth, "women were expected to look after kitchen, house, husband, kids, yard, garden, and animals" and "Only boys were allowed to go to school" (8). Even if a woman was allowed to work outside of the house, such as in the fields, upon returning home "she had to deal with her household chores diligently, as custom, culture, and tradition demanded" (8). The gender binary and division of daily jobs sits firmly in place; Mauritian's today still struggle to compromise between their parents' upbringing and their younger, modern upbringing. Although women are now allowed to go to school, an evolution highlighted in the story through Ratna's (Bala's wife's) return to school, they often take subjects like "Home Economics," or cooking classes. Educational advancement exists, but subjects have become gendered to compromise between shifting gender norms for education and the older generation's desire to maintain strict roles.

The biggest reason for maintaining these roles lies in culturally important marriage rituals. Mauritian weddings are often big affairs, lasting several days, with multiple gatherings symbolizing the woman leaving her childhood home, becoming part of her husband's family, and returning to her family's home after consummation. Bala faces the challenge of an arranged marriage, still fairly common in Mauritius today, and realizes that opposing this practice could mean having to leave his family business, "become an outcast,...[and] find another base" (16). All of this wraps up the socio-cultural complications of being a modern Mauritian – now we have to add outside companies seeking to profit off of the island's tourist potential.

### **The Threat of Conglomerates**

Industrialization in Mauritius creeps up on the population because "it was the policy of the central government to promote industrial development in rural areas" (21). Virahsawmy hits

on both the monetary enticement that companies offer governments and, in part, the corruption common to the Mauritian government. A running joke amongst all Mauritians is that, in order to get any legal paperwork processed without spending bribe money or being sent back-and-forth between different departments, you need to know someone working in the government. Mauritian politics revolves around connections and networking; unfortunately for newcomers, unless you can bribe your way in, you often need to have family connections— simply being introduced does not always entice a government worker to do you a favor. Big businesses, like clothing factories and hotel chains, present enough money to buy the rights to land.

In addition to broad references to the corrupt government selling land to the highest bidder, Virahsawmy references a problem specific to many islands – public beaches. Mauritius is famous for its resorts, but selling land to hotel chains often includes the right to privatize the beach bordering the land. In Bala’s home town, “ all the open spaces began to disappear. Soon...Grand Bois and Bois Noir, which had since time immemorial belonged to everyone, now belonged to a developer” (27). Unfortunately, this produces a chain reaction – “Poor farmers were forced to sell their land; rich farmers saw their empires grow” (27); resorts need local workers and workers need homes, shops, and banks. This is the point we are reaching in Mauritius because developer’s figured out that building one secluded resort meant having to develop the supporting economic infrastructure from scratch. Instead, tourists visiting Mauritius will notice that their resort is bordered on both sides by other resorts – this way, developers need only expand the economy instead of constantly having to create a new one.

*Flame Tree Lane* moves beyond this point into the possibilities of major cities created solely by developers and the needs of workers; “the financiers, the big farmers, the industrialists, ... succeeded in creating a municipal administration, which...made it easy for a small group to

expand, a group of people who controlled everything; land, water, the plantations, industry, banks, the media” (27). Virahsawmy makes the case that if this happens, media will only describe the success of development as a means to entice more visitors to come to Mauritius. Bala’s hometown because such a “a model of development...[that] No-one was...interested in finding out what had happened to the farmers, the fishermen, [or] the artisans. There were no articles about the huge ghetto, a rubbish dump of a city without water, electricity, decent housing, or social services – a human dustbin where alcohol, drugs, and AIDS underwent great ‘development.’” (29). These lines compel readers because they sound like the stories of global cities where a high standard of living tends to mask an underbelly of poverty and homelessness.

Orlando provides one example of this – tourists come from all over the world and they boost the economy of this city; however, we have affluent areas like Winter Park and poor areas like Pine Hills. This next phrase, “UniCity [the developed area] was bathing in pools of money, whereas Danfour [the original city] was drowning in misery...the gap between these two realities was growing” (38), sounds an awful lot like Winter Park vs Pine Hills – Winter Park has a white majority, like the rest of Florida, and designer shops whereas Pine Hills is a minority-majority area (in which the state’s minority populations make up the majority there) and has a reputation for high crime rates and ill-maintained buildings.

In this fictional version of Mauritius, 90% of the island’s wealth is controlled by the municipal administration – made up of financiers, big farmers, and industrialists. I think Virahsawmy speaks from experience when he talks of “the population...[not being] interested in highflying rhetoric...Violent rhetoric was more attractive to them” (39). As a politician, he advocated for a fair society that rejected racial, religious, and gender discrimination and he was involved in a party initially created by students. The threat he outlines through big businesses

and development includes the destruction of community support systems and youth groups. His “prophetic tale” (Lionnet) ends with his protagonists, Bala and Ratna, realizing that “UniCity” will never deliver on its promises of developing a community for all. Instead, the protagonists become community leaders aiming to provide the services denied them by the developers.

### **A solution**

Through Bala, Virahsawmy represents his own ideology. After seeing his home go from poor and happy, to poor and dangerous, the solution to their socio-economic ills must be to reincorporate the old farmers, artisans, and fishermen into the economy, supporting them by helping them create their own organizations. When discussing the idea of an independent city, Virahsawmy’s goal is “to provide education and health for all people” (42), instead of allowing developers to carve out touristic areas, excluding the original population, and neglecting overall community advancement.

As Mauritius’ continues to develop, the gap between Eastern-minded older generations and Westernized younger generations widens. *Flame Tree Lane* reflects the continuous tug-of-war occurring between these groups, as well as their uneasy compromises. Going through this story reveals Mauritian life to the reader and it asks the reader to question their place within this spectrum of conservative traditionalist to liberal reformer. Virahsawmy presents a compelling argument about the dangers of development: they neglect the majority in favor a minority and increase the economic divide. *Flame Tree Lane* provides a rich example of Mauritius, including history, politics, culture, economy, and the island’s potential future – it proves itself as a novel worthy of Mauritian readers because it functions as part-historical novel and part-instruction manual. Moreover, Mauritian students can relate to historical, cultural, and economic struggles represented in the novel because they live in the center of it. What better way to engage students

in a discussion on the value of national literature than to give them a story in which they can find themselves? *Flame Tree Lane* presents a happy medium with which to introduce students to the power of literature as a discussion tool; I believe we could also help ease students into the study of French and English literature in using this novel as a filter with which to consider how Western literature addresses its own historical, cultural, and economic baggage.

## **Western Literature Studied in Mauritius**

Due to the British education system, many public school teachers teach Western literature in the manner they learned it as children. Questioning western literature's merits to the Mauritian conscious is important, especially if teachers want their students to value literature as a mode of discussion. Students often ask the relevance of literature on their future lives—I believe drawing connections between these works and each student's life is a necessity for literature's survival, especially in an age when frequently people gravitate to reading digital media. The following groupings, taken from the Cambridge International Education (CIE) syllabi, are intended to pose that exact question of connecting and contrasting western literature to the Mauritian experience.

To critics who judge that studying western literature is a necessity for creating common global perspective and citizenship, I am not negating the importance of the western canon. I simply believe that, beyond the basic comprehension of plot and background, students should be encouraged to explore their own experience with a literary work instead of having their interaction molded by a western authority. Furthermore, students might stand a better chance of connecting to global literature if they were able to connect to their own literature first; after all, the advantage of seeing oneself represented in literature develops one's ability to critique the representations of others in foreign literature.

## Why We Should Critically Analyze Shakespeare

Asking about Shakespeare in Mauritius elicits a variety of responses, from nonchalant shrugs to recitals of Macbeth's or Hamlet's soliloquys by heart. *The Tragedy of Othello* and *The Merchant of Venice* are two of Shakespeare's most well-known plays and they all grapple with issues of love, manipulation, and sanity. However, they also share the similarity of showcasing a perspective on race relations during the Elizabethan era. Perhaps it is difficult to show why this might be pertinent to a Mauritian audience, but both Othello and Shylock reveal a trend of Caucasian superiority in Western literature. Mauritian students should closely analyze the portrayal of Othello and Shylock because it arguably provides practice for noticing the macroaggressions present in modern society.

### *The Tragedy of Othello* – Accurate Portrayal of Facts or Sinister Perpetuation of Stereotypes?

*Othello* proves Shakespeare's enduring relevance because, under the guise of simple insults, Shakespeare injects Western stereotypes of Africans and Orientals still understandable in modern society. Othello, who is both black in skin color and oriental in his Moorish origin, is subjected to the negative perceptions of the Western society he inhabits. The play notably uses stereotypes on African criminality and Oriental drug use. The reader must recognize that Othello only fully adopts Venetian culture in killing himself due to his realization that his "Moorish" actions are condemned by his new Venetian identity. His story proves that full assimilation between opposing cultures is futile and ultimately leads to self-destruction.

Before the play begins, Othello has already gone through the process of assimilating to Venetian culture—he takes part in society and is renowned for his military victories. The opening of the play is the *in medias res* of Othello's time in Venetian society and the play opens to Othello having married the Venetian Desdemona as the next step for his social integration. When confronted by his new son-in-law, Brabantio uses African and Oriental stereotypes against Othello, despite Othello's attempt at assimilation through marriage.

**“Brabantio**

O thou foul thief, where has thou stowed my daughter?

Damned as thou art, thou hast enchanted her!

...If she in chains of magic were not bound,

...Would ever have, t'incur a general mock,

Run from her guardage to the sooty bosom

Of such a thing as thou – to fear, not to delight,

Judge me the world if 'tis not gross in sense

That thou hast practiced on her with foul charms,

Abused her delicate youth with drugs or minerals”

Act 1, Scene 2, lines 61 – 74

In making these remarks, Brabantio figuratively slaps Othello by denying his efforts at assimilation and resorting to ethno-racial assumptions. Brabantio calls upon Western society's racial valuing of white over black as valid proof that his own daughter cannot find happiness with a former Muslim (Moor). His words on drugs and minerals clearly references the mistaken European assumption that the Orient callously enjoyed hallucinatory and sedative substances. The stereotypes of criminality and drug use could be commonplace insults but, as directed to a



valued Moor-turned-Venetian, they come across as sinister allusions that Othello has inherent and unchangeable vices, challenging Othello's act of denying his former culture.

Up to this point, Brabantio's remarks could be passed off as representative of European xenophobic ramblings in response to a foreigner's success in their society. However, the futility of full assimilation due to perpetuated stereotypes comes to a head in Othello's last soliloquy.

**“Othello**

.... I pray you, in your letters,  
 When you shall these unlucky deeds relate,  
 Speak of me as I am. Nothing extenuate,  
 Nor set down aught in malice. Then must you speak  
 ... of one whose hand,  
 Like the base Judean, threw a pearl away  
 Richer than all his tribe; ...  
 And say besides that in Aleppo once,  
 Where a malignant and a turbaned Turk  
 Beat a Venetian and traduced the state,  
 I took by th' throat the circumcised dog  
 And smote him – thus.  
 [*He stabs himself.*]

Act V Scene 2 lines 340 – 356

His soliloquy begins with a plea to the Venetian authorities to accurately portray him while justifying their inability to do so by drawing attention to himself as a foreigner who devalues

whiteness (“a pearl”). Othello judges himself from the perspective of a Venetian for having Moorish heritage and behaviors while believing that whiteness should be valued over blackness. The Venetian Othello finds the Moorish Othello to be a foreigner and philistine incapable of seeing the superiority of whiteness. In doing so, he simultaneously fully assumes Venetian culture while applying Venetian stereotypes against himself. This soliloquy exhibits the war of identity within Othello—he is a Turk, he has killed a Venetian, and he is circumcised versus he is a Christian, he has killed Turks as a Venetian general, and he has a Venetian marriage. He must therefore condemn himself for his Turkish criminality because his Venetian conscious forces him to prioritize European viewpoints over their Oriental counterparts. The spate of racially charged insults pervading this play culminates in the white Iago being returned to Venice contrasted with the black Othello sentencing himself to death, as a Venetian, for acting like a Moor.

Shakespeare neglects to say whether these effectively stereotypical descriptions are meant to be taken literally or figuratively. In looking at these quotes, Othello’s blackness is a matter of interpretation to which even the character himself succumbs since his attempt at assimilation conflicts with his compatriots’ insistence on identifying him by his heritage. The fact that Venetians refer to thick lips and dark skin in their critiques of Othello could indicate that Othello has less drastic visual differences as compared to Venetians. Shakespeare’s ambiguity allows readers to deduce that the Venetians over-exaggerate Othello’s blackness in order to deny him the right to assimilate.

Ironically, unlike the incompatibility of Moorish assimilation into an unforgiving Venetian society, this play’s crafting is not incompatible with its insidious perpetuation of stereotypes. It is necessary that we see the stereotypes and dispute them to ensure that they are

not transmitted to future generations. Recognizing stereotypes is the key to prohibiting others from unknowingly adopting and projecting them, in the same way that Brabantio adopted Iago's racism and later projected them in his speech. Othello was incapable of assimilating to Venetian society, as evidenced by his demise, as soon as he tried to deny his own heritage and adopt theirs. Post-colonials should take this as a lesson not to adopt Western canonical literature as their own but rather to recognize and respond to it. As Othello was able to exist in Venetian society before he tried to assimilate entirely, post-colonials must be aware of canonical (very often colonial) literature, but they must be sure to process it with a grain of salt for fear of nullifying their own subaltern heritage.

In respect to Mauritian students, Othello presents a valid case study of the pitfalls of assimilation. Many students who aim to attend university hope to go abroad, and there is a substantial exodus of Mauritians who were educated on the island, left for higher education, and who do not return to live and work in Mauritius. We need to realize that students may be seriously contemplating emigration, and that they will need to deal with the complex question of assimilating to their adopted culture versus the preservation of their cultural identity. For that reason, *The Tragedy of Othello* presents a very useful, if highly dramatized, example of this conflict and the complications that arise from assimilating and even marrying into a different culture.

*The Merchant of Venice – Racism Then and Today*

In the Merchant of Venice, Shylock represents the stereotypes of Jews as viewed by the British. There are three main Jewish stereotypes presented in this text: their greed for money, their hatred of others, and their inhumanity. All three components come together to create the caricature of the villainous Jew who is ultimately defeated by Christianity. Anti-Semitism runs high in this play; but Shakespeare seems to blur the lines by giving Shylock a voice with which to defend his actions, despite his role as a villain. While Shakespeare allows Shylock to defend himself, it seems it is only included to complete Shylock's defeat at the end of the play, not because Shakespeare wants to create a truly well-rounded character. Furthermore, Antonio's versus Shylock's hypocrisy serves to illustrate how institutionalized racism can differentiate between and destroy different identities.

To begin, Shylock's dialogue almost always depicts either his monetary greed, his hatred of Christians, or both. In his first scene, both stereotypes are introduced to the reader when Shylock expresses how he interacts with Christians: he limits himself to business and excuses himself from socializing. From the passage below, a reader could infer that Shylock maintains a separation between business and leisure for religious reasons; however, later quotes imply that his hatred of Christians is the main reason for his distanced behaviour.

**Shylock**

I will buy with you, sell with you, talk with you,  
walk with you, and so following; but I will not eat with  
you, drink with you, nor pray with you.

(Act 1, Scene 3: 33-35)

Shylock's dialogue links him to his love of money, such as when he leaves the house for dinner, mentioning his worry to his daughter because he dreamt of "money bags." Other characters also relate Shylock's words, further highlighting his money obsession. A good example is the observance of Shylock's rage after his daughter elopes with her Christian lover and takes her father's money and jewels with her.

**Solanio**

I never heard a passion so confused

...

As the dog Jew did utter in the streets:

"My daughter! O my ducats! O my daughter!

Fled with a Christian! O my Christian ducats!

Justice! The law! My ducats and my daughter!

(Act 2, Scene 7: 11-16)

Shylock is villainized and dehumanized for his hatred of Christians and his preoccupation with money. Both serve to over-emphasize the Jewish stereotypes of greed and malicious intent. In a double standard, Antonio and the other Venetians are not villainized for their hatred of Jews. Moreover, their continued criticism of Shylock as evil seems to reinforce Shylock's villainy rather than prove the Venetians' maleficence.

Conflictingly, Shakespeare gives Shylock a voice and allows him to cite Antonio's actions against him.

**Shylock**

Still have I borne it with a patient shrug,

For suff'rance is the badge of all our tribe.

You call me misbeliever, cutthroat dog,  
 And spit upon my Jewish gabardine,  
 ...  
 You that did void your rheum upon my beard  
 And foot me as you spurn a stranger cur

(Act 1, Scene 3: 106-113)

The reader can easily perceive Shylock's disbelief. Antonio represents a common xenophobic attitude—he treats Shylock as the representative of all Jews and speaks of him being unchristian, but he knows nothing about Shylock as a person. His arrogance in treating Shylock as an animal and still asking to be in his debt proves his disregard for Shylock's emotions. By dehumanizing Shylock in calling him names and spitting on him, Antonio denies Shylock the ability to have emotions, thereby making it easier for him to take advantage of Shylock. Antonio's capability to nullify Shylock's humanity shines through in the next quote.

**Antonio**

I am as like to call thee so again,  
 To spit on thee again, to spurn thee too.

(Act 1, Scene 3: 127-128)

I believe that the strength of Antonio's xenophobic beliefs are meant to directly contrast with Shylock's later conversion to Christianity. Shylock exposes Antonio as a hypocrite in highlighting how he treats Shylock negatively but is capable of asking for his help when in need. The hypocrisy of his actions proves that Antonio harbors no personal grudge against Shylock; he simply dislikes Shylock because of the arbitrary social division of religion.

Antonio's hypocrisy contrasts with Shylock's conversion because Antonio, by virtue of being part of his society's majority, can get away with his actions. Shylock has no power over Antonio and, unfortunately, Antonio is backed by the power of his government's law. The end ruling which forces Shylock to convert is meant to show Shylock as the hypocritical character. Shakespeare arguably finishes Shylock's story this way to fit in with the attitudes of his time; however, by having Antonio also be hypocritical in demeaning and accepting the help of Shylock, Shakespeare manages to show a deeper social trend of majority-over-minority rule.

The minority, like the Jews, cannot easily escape the law even if they are innocent because the laws are intentionally set against them. As Portia states,

**Portia**

The law hath yet another hold on you,  
 It is enacted in the laws of Venice,  
 If it be proved against an alien  
 That by direct or indirect attempts  
 He seek the life of any citizen,  
 The party 'gainst the which he doth contrive  
 Shall seize one half his goods; the other half  
 Comes to the privy coffer of the state;  
 And the offender's life lies in the mercy  
 Of the duke only, 'gainst all other voice.

(Act 4, Scene 1: 345-354)

The law specifically targets "aliens" – a term which is still used in today's legalese, such as in the United States where immigrants are given an "alien registration number." Now, the term

“aliens” denotes all immigrants regardless of race or religion; during Shakespeare’s time religion was still a marker of native versus alien populations since most countries were quite homogenous.

As previously stated, Antonio can escape the consequences of his negative treatment towards Shylock because, in a world where he belongs to the majority and the law reflects only majority interests, there are no repercussions for his behaviour. Antonio lives in a world where his actions are not viewed as wrong; the play reflects this thinking because Shylock is forced to choose between becoming Christian or death. Viewed this way, Shakespeare was not recounting a simple tale of holy Christianity versus suspicious Judaism—his play recounts a tale of institutionalized racism.

Why is this important today and to Mauritians? Because divisions between immigrants and natives still exist in legalese words, such as “alien.” The story of institutionalized racism is an old one, spanning from the United States’ Jim Crow laws, to South Africa’s apartheid laws, and to older colonial laws created for the benefit of colonial powers. More importantly, *The Merchant of Venice* should be read as a lesson in the trials of immigration—it illustrates that many countries have laws in place against immigrants and that they need to overcome several barriers to fit in. It is also a warning—that the price of survival can be the cost of one’s identity and that much work remains to be done in educating everyone that people are fundamentally equal and that ideological differences do not denominate good and evil.



### Why Are We Studying Jane Austen?

Jane Austen's *Mansfield Park* revolves around marriage, money, and manipulation. Readers follow the story of Fanny Price, who comes from a poor family with wealthy relations. The opening of the novel describes how Fanny's mother married a poor sailor, defying the chance of a better match made possible by her eldest sister's marriage to a Sir Thomas Bertram. When Fanny's mother struggles to provide for her growing number of children, she calls upon her estranged family to help her. At the age of 10, Fanny Price is sent to Mansfield, the home of the Bertram family, and Austen recounts how Fanny grows up with, and fits into, an aristocratic environment. As her and her two female cousins (Maria and Julia) come of age, marriage becomes their primary concern, and Austen hones in on a study of the ties between marriage, money, and social manipulation. Her characters reveal that both social manipulation and money are necessary for good marriages; either a woman attracts a man of good fortune, as with Maria Bertram and Mr. Rushworth, or a man uses his wealth to induce a woman to marry him, as shown by Henry Crawford and Fanny Price.

Jane Austen reigns as a writer of realistic novels describing the 19<sup>th</sup> century, specifically the relationships between various rungs of society. However useful *Mansfield Park* is as a snapshot of humanity's materialism, it poses an intriguing question on the role of slavery as the wind beneath the sails of aristocratic prosperity. In the text, Austen drops vague references to Sir Thomas's property in Antigua, its welfare, and the slave-trade; however, she refrains from giving an opinion, calling into question her position on the ethics of slavery. Nonetheless, these references, and this subject's casual treatment in the text, are both worth studying within the context of the marriage-money-manipulation theme.

Sir Thomas's property is first mentioned in the opening chapter. Fanny Price's mother writes to her sister imploring her patronage of her eldest boy, asking, "Was there any chance of his (Fanny's brother's) being useful to Sir Thomas in the concerns of his West Indian property?" (42). Although the reader stays uninformed as to the form of Sir Thomas' property, likely a plantation, the bulk of the labor force would have been slaves. Austen published the novel in 1814, well before slavery in the colonies was theoretically abolished in 1833.<sup>4</sup> I believe this question also throws suggests that aristocrats might not have been expected to oversee their own plantations. Mrs. Price makes her son disposable to her brother-in-law's overseas needs; I suspect she asks to make her son "useful" as Sir Thomas' representative in Antigua, not as Sir Thomas' assistant while the baron oversees the plantation in person.

The second reference to overseas territory is in Chapter 3, when Fanny has been with the Bertram's for five years. Fanny's removal to Mansfield Park from her home had been encouraged by Mrs. Norris – sister to both Lady Bertram and Fanny's mother – whose husband acts as clergyman to the Mansfield area. As Fanny is now fifteen and as Mr. Norris has passed away, Sir Thomas "expected his sister-in-law to claim her share in their niece (Fanny)...and as his own circumstances were rendered less fair than heretofore, by some recent losses on his West India Estate...it became not undesirable to himself to be relieved from the expense of her support" (59). This indicates that the bulk of Sir Thomas' wealth rests on profit he makes in the West Indies; otherwise he would not think it so useful that his niece be taken off of his hands. His thoughts suggest that Mansfield Park could not exist without the income from the plantation,

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<sup>4</sup> "Slavery Abolition Act." *Encyclopaedia Britannica*. <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Slavery-Abolition-Act>

and his situation additionally proposes that many of the 19<sup>th</sup> century's aristocracy was equally dependent on slave exploitation.

Later, the property's success proves to be indispensable as "Sir Thomas found it expedient to go to Antigua himself, for the better arrangement of his affairs...with the probability of being nearly a twelvemonth absent" (65-66). Sir Thomas' voyage could be excused as efficient business management until Austen finally says that the plantation's issues left "a large part of his income...unsettled" (70). The situation becomes dire enough that when "unfavourable circumstances [arise]...[as] he was beginning to turn all his thoughts towards England," and Sir Thomas remains in Antigua, "without any near prospect of finishing his business" (71). Initially, Sir Thomas takes his eldest son, Thomas, with him, but sends him back home once the situation becomes more complicated. In doing so, he arguably denies his son valuable lessons in their family's dependence on labor and trade and Sir Thomas ends up maintaining his son's privileged attitude on money (as always being available to him) instead of showing his son the ease with which their fortune could disappear.

During Sir Thomas' long absence, his children enjoy the lack of parental supervision and decide to put on a play. As acting was not considered a polite trade, the play would not likely have been allowed by Sir Thomas. In taking advantage of his absence, three of Sir Thomas' children (Thomas, Maria, and Julia) show how little aristocratic children cared about the source of their wealth. This theme appears in other works by Austen where children born into wealth often disregard the methods their parents used to gain it – in *Pride and Prejudice*, the author notes how the Bingley sisters have twenty thousand pounds each, but that they neglect to remember that their fortunes were made in trade and not inherited. Austen makes no overt comments such as the above in *Mansfield Park*, but Edmund's comment on poor acting

highlights aristocratic carelessness. He states sarcastically that his siblings' acting skills are "the raw efforts of those who have not been bred to the trade, – a set of gentlemen and ladies, who have all the disadvantages of education and decorum to struggle through" (150). Edmund's critique ridicules the lightheartedness of his family by showing their inconsideration of people who must work for money. By comparison, the family's playacting is vain since they act to exercise bad behaviour, not to value acting as a form of art.

Soon after their scheme for a play is set, Sir Thomas' "business in Antigua had latterly been prosperously rapid, and he came directly" (195), to the dismay of his children. From this point onwards, Sir Thomas' fortune seems to be secure, and he expresses no more troubles over his Antiguan property. However, one night after his return and his dismissal of the play, Edmund recalls Fanny's query "about the slave trade last night?" (213). Austen does not provide Sir Thomas' response, and this reference represents the sole concrete link between the slave trade and the Bertram's Antiguan property. Edmund thinks that "it would have pleased your uncle to be inquired of farther (by Fanny, on the slave trade)," despite the other household members' disinterest (213) which hints that Sir Thomas would have gladly elaborated on his experience with slave workers; however, Austen decides to neglect the subject hereafter.

The last interesting reference to his overseas property comes during a ball upon at Mansfield Park. When discussing dancing, Sir Thomas becomes "engaged in describing the balls of Antigua" (258), hinting at his involvement in the social gatherings of Antigua's plantation families. One could argue that, given the vague nature of these remarks, Austen did not intend to inspire a discussion on the relationship between the British aristocracy and slavery. However, I would argue the exact opposite – why add such small references if she did not believe them to be accurate.

Austen's reputation as an accurate chronicler of landed gentry indicates that every detail she includes in her novels must be important. The author's portrayal of the Bertram family's indifference to slavery represents the probable attitude of most aristocratic families of the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> century. Sir Thomas' decision to travel to Antigua could be exceptional but for his revelation of associating with plantation society.

In a way, Austen's offhanded references illustrate the lackadaisical attitude of most people towards slavery and it supports the adage, "out of sight, out of mind." The only person in the novel who questions Sir Thomas about slavery is Fanny Price, but she never returns to the subject in the novel because it affects her even less than it affects Sir Thomas. Some critics theorize that Fanny's question indicates a greater sensitivity to human labor, but her disregard for following up on the question reveals either a weak character or an uninterested one. Fanny often comes across as a cipher seeking to please, entertain, or fulfil the mundane desires of those around her. Although her emotions justify her as a fully-functioning and perceptive human, I doubt her question to Sir Thomas was anything more than her taking an interest in his preoccupations in place of his selfish children.

From a postcolonial perspective, *Mansfield Park* elaborates on the British aristocracy's preoccupations with marriage, money, and social manipulation as it allowed them to overlook their own humanity. Britain could further distance itself from colonial slave labor atrocities as slavery was not formally legalized on mainland Britain; it was only legal in the colonies.

Therefore, Austen's novel justly captures Britain's attitude towards slavery; it was an institution existing beyond the confines of daily existence and need only be referred to as a matter of business or conversation. We should use this perception to motivate our personal introspection; in viewing how people were able to brush aside the violence of slave labor, we should question

the extent to which we do the same now on issues such as poverty, unfair labor, or genocide – all of which seem to have replaced colonial slavery as the victims of media silence and misinformation.

Schools cover Jane Austen because of her genius in capturing the details of life; her works are snapshots of her time period and present cases of 19<sup>th</sup> century life for study. *Mansfield Park* carries some worth through this definition because it can help us define what the important questions of life are. The Bertram family does not spend time considering the roots of their fortune, although they do think a lot on how to spend it. In disregarding the root, they overlook some of the greatest ethical dilemmas of their day. We have to ask ourselves, what questions are we overlooking when we feel happy getting a bargain in a clothing store? Do we stop to consider that those clothes are cheap due to unfair labor laws in Bangladesh? We often never think that our clothing could have caused the deaths of hundreds of workers employed in structurally unsound factories, and the media does not regularly cover these topics either. Mauritius has some clothing factories; reading this novel in class could prompt students to wonder about the conditions in those factories and even attempt to visit them and to find out whether they too disregard important issues.

## **International Literature Studied in Mauritius**

The works explored in this section explore subaltern perspectives lacking in the western works of the previous section. Moreover, the struggle between eastern and western perspectives is a notable theme in this works. The following literature has a higher likelihood of eliciting a genuine connection in Mauritians because the situations and struggles are relatable and empathetic.

While I wish to critique this choice, the fact is that parents do hope that their children will be able to study in prestigious overseas universities. The CIE system is one step on the path to making their children competitive and it is highly unlikely that a sudden realization in their own literary worth will induce a change in this environment. This section is merely suggestive of the worth that Mauritians may bring to discussions on international works, and that Mauritians should attempt to exploit their own sympathy to this literature as a notch towards the goal of popularizing previously-subaltern perspectives for the betterment of global society. The following essays aim at proving the worth of an expanding global canon which encourages both eastern and western canons to interact, explore, and comment on one another. The western canon, which has dominated popular literature for some time, could arguably find itself benefiting from the critique and rich complexities inherent in subaltern literature.

## Race in Education and the Necessity of Catering to Students instead of Goals

### *My Children! My Africa!* (1990) by Athol Fugard

Athol Fugard's play, set in apartheid-era South Africa, centers around three characters: Isabel, Thami, and Mr. M. Their relationship is peculiar because it grows amidst the racist atmosphere surrounding them – Isabel is a young, white female who teams up with Thami, a young black male, to enter a literary competition. They are tutored by Mr. Myalaty (Mr. M), the black teacher of Thami's school, Zolile High School.

The high school is in “the location” (their equivalent of the American “ghetto”), and is attended by only black students. The play opens to a school debate between Isabel's white debate team and Thami's black debate team, moderated by Mr. M. The plot covers a range of racial problems, including relationships between black and white youths, the communication barriers between black and white communities, and the tension created through Western colonial traditions and African traditions. However, I believe the most compelling question the play poses is: Is education a method of colonial control or subaltern enabler? This particular query is debated through the education system's promotion of Western literature versus Mr. M's hope that the subaltern community, or black South Africans, can game the system by besting their white counterparts in their own cultural territory.

The relationship between Thami and Isabel functions as a subtler enforcement of the educational divide between black and white communities. Their friendship is meant to bridge the divide between white and black but also between white female and black male. Fugard did not choose a girl and a boy for nothing – the point was that their friendship would have the audience wondering whether they would develop a romance. In the play, their friendship only goes as far



as working with one another and brushing by the conflicts waiting to explode between their lifestyles. On the other hand, they are both pivotal characters because they provide the audience with two drastically different student-teacher relationships. Mr. M and Isabel have a very open discussion on racial issues whereas Mr. M and Thami have a strained relationship due to their lack of communication and understanding. Mr. M sees Thami as both his educational protégé and as a pseudo-son who should not question his elder's opinion; Thami sees Mr. M as a father figure but the missing two-way communication makes him view Mr. M as an obtuse teacher by the end of the play.

Our first signs on the difference in white and black education are in the first scene. Isabel wants to go to Rhodes University and go into media whereas Thami expresses no concrete interest in higher education. Fugard's choice to have her want to attend Rhodes University is no coincidence – Cecil Rhodes was a well-known supporter of British imperialism, set up the state of Rhodesia in present day Zimbabwe and Zambia, and helped support claims that the ruins of Great Zimbabwe, an ancient city of African origin, was built by the Phoenicians or Arabs. I do not believe that the reference to Cecil Rhodes is a coincidence in a text commenting on the racially-motivated educational divide in apartheid South Africa. This name-dropping of an extant university named after a supporter of colonialism only highlights the juxtaposition of Isabel's interest in higher education, as a white female who benefits from a white-minority government, and Thami's lackadaisical attitude towards education.

However, it would be a mistake to assume Thami dislikes school. He states that he enjoyed it in middle school before the pressures of his society grew – people teased him for his academic prowess because many understood that the academic system was skewed in favor of promoting Western culture over African culture. This is an observable phenomenon even today;

parents who understand that there racism is institutionalized in education pass on their prejudices to their children and the culture transforms to regard school as “uncool” resulting in students who do not take education seriously. This turns into a vicious circle because the more students under-perform, the less interest governments tend to focus on them, and the situation worsens. The next occurrence ends in public discontent and youth violence because the latter have no other outlet for their energy – exactly what Fugard illustrates towards the end of the play. In this cycle, the colonial policy of favoring whites over blacks is fully supported by the education system.

On the flip side, we have Mr. M who, knowing that the “inferior “Bantu Education”” does not serve his pupils, regards it as his “deepest obligation to you young men and women to sabotage it” (58). He wants his crowning glory to be Thami, who he hopes to help get a full university scholarship through the literary competition that Isabel and Thami prepare for throughout the play. Believing that the literature quiz will allow him to “fight the lunacy” of colonial education, Mr. M says “It’s not easy you know to be a teacher, to put your heart and soul into educating an eager young mind which you know will never get a chance to develop further and realize its full potential” (21). The issue with Mr. M is that he seems to live vicariously through Thami—he wants Thami to succeed and rise above the racial divide because he believes Thami will then be able to help change the system. However, he does not treat Thami like the man he wants him to be; he speaks freely with Isabel as an equal and forgoes this equality with Thami. In a way, Mr. M seems to fall victim to both his fantasy and the racial divide since he both needs Isabel’s support for Thami’s education and he must treat her nicely as the segregated society dictates he defer to her.

Isabel notes that Mr. M has “got a career planned out for” (13) Thami. Thami responds by saying “he makes me so mad sometimes. He always thinks *he* knows what is best for me. He never asks me how I feel about things. I know he means well, but I’m not a child anymore. I’ve got ideas of my own” (13). Mr. M wants to enable Thami, as a subaltern student, to rise above South Africa’s racial divide like Nelson Mandela. Unfortunately, by focusing on furthering his goal of pushing Thami into higher education without explaining his dream – to banish racist fears with communication and knowledge (23) – he condemns Thami to the vicious social cycle mentioned earlier.

A second major indication that schools were colonial tools comes through Isabel’s monologue in scene two. She recollects her white teacher’s opinion on sending the debate team to a black school as, “a chance for a “pioneering intellectual exchange” between the two schools.” This sounds very hopeful, but then we learn “she also said she had checked with the police and they had said it would be alright provided we were driven straight to the school and then straight out afterwards” (15-16). The teacher’s decision to present the educational rhetoric and then to qualify that the debate went ahead because the white students’ security was assured is a figurative slap in the face. It knocks on a problem we all face today: how ethical is it to call our actions progressive if we only commit to them after ensuring our political and physical safety?

The teacher was able to say that the debate was a step forward in “pioneering intellectual exchange” because that rhetoric had been adopted by politicians and accepted by the public – in fact, reading between the lines tells us that this “exchange” is nothing more than a coded reinforcement of white superiority, similarly expressed in Kipling’s famous poem “The White Man’s Burden.” This intellectual exchange posits that the sharing of information will happen on both ends but everyone in the play understands that the white establishment thinks the

information will flow from white to black students. Isabel even remembers her debate colleague's comment before they went to Zolile High School, "We must remember that English isn't their home language. So don't use too many big words and speak slowly and carefully" (16). Isabel's shift from a superior to a receptive attitude is an example of how much education caters to political goals instead of to students themselves. Isabel grows from a naïve and extroverted student, at the beginning, to an aware activist at the end – her experience with others opened the boundaries of her world. This lesson in political rhetoric overtaking education carries weight for any student reading or watching the play because it begs us to ask that question of our own educational system.

A third indication that this education promotes colonial values lies in the list of author and works that Thami and Isabel study for the literature competition. The subjects are as follows: the poets Wordsworth, Southey, Coleridge, Lord Byron, Tennyson, Percy Shelley, John Keats, Mary Shelley, and the novelists Thomas Hardy, Jane Austen, and Charles Dickens. The latter three names are repeated four times in scene four, and they are also the same authors used in the Cambridge International Education system, used by Mauritian public schools. Thami and Isabel memorize the works and biographies of all the poets listed and recite them the way students today do – think of Shakespeare and the need to memorize soliloquy's to quote them in exam papers. In this case, they are memorizing these works to quote them in a literary competition that focuses on English poets and authors thereby giving value to knowing Western literature as a means of advancement and glory within society. The same is true of Mauritius; knowing these works increases students' ability to perform well on exams because the exams value that kind of knowledge – but it still begs the question of whether Western knowledge is worth more than knowledge of your home culture.

As concerns Mauritian education, this play made me wonder about the emphasis on English language and literature in Mauritius when Mauritians more easily speak French and Kreol. Mauritius's advantage is that we have a "biggest loser" system which ensures that all parts of the population are represented in government even if their candidate did not get enough popular votes to win a seat. Our education system, enforcing English and French (and a third language according to race/religion – Hindu, Arabic, and Mandarin) reflects the interests of the whole population but it does seem to neglect Kreol, the language which all the populations use to communicate with one another. The government decreed that Kreol be incorporated into public schools, but some parents and teachers believe this will lower the standard of education and make it more difficult for students to go to British or French universities.

In Isabel's soliloquy, remembering her emotions before the opening debate in Zolile High School, she says "It was *their* school. It was *their* world. I was the outsider and I was being asked to prove myself" (17). This phrase encapsulates my opinion on Mauritian education and the balance between English, French, and Kreol. We should acknowledge Kreol's ability to linguistically reflect Mauritian culture's amalgamation of various traditions from multiple distinct cultures; however, given that many parents and educators believe students need a general Western education in order to receive a globally valued degree, we should filter Western works the way Isabel was judged by the students of Zolile High school. I think the ultimate compromise is to teach students exactly what it means to be Mauritian – through our history, politics, population, and Kreol language – before teaching them English and French literature. This way, Mauritian students can make sure to differentiate their own valuable experiences from literature promoting Western superiority.

### Questioning the Cost of Westernization

Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*, was published in 1958 and quickly became one of the most widely read pieces of African literature written in English. Today, his novel is studied across the African continent; both in grade school and in critical analyses classes. Its status as a game-changer remains undeniable because of its easy tone, stark depictions of reality, and cutting comparisons between African and Western culture. Upon reading this book, the main lesson revolves around the effects of colonialism on Africa's socio-economic and cultural development. In fact, the story arguably claims that colonization killed Africa's true culture since it ends with the willing suicide of its main character, Okonkwo, a warrior and leader representative of Igbo culture. However, the analysis of Okonkwo's Igbo tribe and its evolution under colonialism has already been done, and it serves current Igbo community members more than it could help a Mauritian audience.

From a Mauritian perspective, *Things Fall Apart* has much value in the manner of Achebe's storytelling – it follows and defies the adage “history is written by the winners.” It begs the question: who defines a nation's culture and what does their definition exclude? In looking at the content, narrative focus, and length of each of the novel's three parts, Mauritian readers can note how Achebe respects African heritage, expands upon its perspective, and comprehends the limitations of the Western perspective.

The first part of the novel revolves around our male protagonist, Okonkwo. Instead of launching directly into Okonkwo's life as a part of the village, Umuofia, we learn about his heritage. Despite the fact that, “among these people (the Igbo tribe) a man was judged according to his worth and not according to the worth of his father” (8), family heritage still holds some import, which explains why we learn of Okonkwo's dissolute father in the first chapter. By

presenting Okonkwo's father as lazy and indebted to the village, readers can later comprehend and respect Okonkwo's fierce independence and masculine insecurities. From his heritage, we move on to learning of Okonkwo's strength as a fighter and prowess as a warrior who, "on great occasions...drank palm-wine from his first human head" collected in war (10). Beyond Okonkwo, we learn that his village, Umuofia, "was feared by all its neighbors. It was powerful in war and in magic (through their Oracle), and its priests and medicine men were feared in all the surrounding country" (11). Achebe aims to set up both Okonkwo's and Umuofia's success through this expository information, before detailing Igbo marriage and birth customs.

Among the customs to which the reader is introduced include: its practice of sending an ultimatum to an enemy before declaring war, its preference for peace over war, and its trial proceedings for unhappy couples or land disputes. From these social proceedings, Achebe then illustrates cultural practices, such as the "Week of Peace" observed before the planting season to please earth goddess Ani (30-31) and the punishment one receives for transgressing the order to do no work and commit no violence. Achebe further details the daily practices of the pre-colonial Igbo tribe by including episodes in which Okonkwo interacts with an Oracle who saves his favorite daughter's life as well as birth and burial superstitions, such as the abandonment of twins and the burial of diseased bodies in a common plot of land. The purpose of these heavy details is to prove the existence of an African civilization. During the 19<sup>th</sup> century, attributing ruins in Africa to ancient Phoenician, Egyptian, or Greco-Aryan civilizations developed into a trend – famously exemplified by the Rhodesian state's insistence on rejecting the Great Zimbabwe

Ruins as the remains of an ancient African city.<sup>5</sup> Furthermore, Achebe emphasizes the establishment of pre-colonial African traditions by writing through Okonkwo's perspective.

Depth is added to this socio-cultural picture through the perspectives of Okonkwo's wives as well, namely his second wife as she thinks about her "deepening despair" over her "ten children...nine of [whom] had died in infancy, usually before the age of three" (77). Achebe successfully shows the difference between Igbo culture and modern culture – he simultaneously pairs his humanization of the Igbo with the culture's occasional brutality, such as when "the medicine man...ordered that there should be no more mourning for the dead child. He brought out a sharp razor...and began to mutilate the child...After such treatment it (souls of wicked children) would think twice before coming again, unless it was one of those stubborn ones who returned, carrying the stamp of their mutilation" (78-79). In humanizing the Igbo tribe, Achebe can directly contrast them with the Europeans' humanity and cruelty in the following sections.

In part two, Okonkwo is exiled for accidentally killing someone when his weapon malfunctions in a wedding celebration. As tradition dictates, he must return to his mother's home with his family for seven years before returning to Umuofia. This section serves as both reuniting Okonkwo to his motherland, and to his roots, as well as a transition between Igbo lifestyles and Christian lifestyles. Upon his return to his maternal uncle's home, his uncle questions him on the role of the mother and states,

It's true that a child belongs to its father. But when a father beats his child, it seeks sympathy in its mother's hut. A man belongs to his fatherland when things are good and life is sweet. But when there is sorrow and bitterness he finds refuge in his motherland.

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<sup>5</sup> "Origins." *Africa's Great Civilizations*. Presented by Henry Louis Gates, Jr.



Your mother is here to protect you...And that is why we say that mother is supreme.

(134)

While the opening of part two explains a central tenant of Igbo culture, part two is half the length of part one. Achebe uses the shorter length of this section to transition from a cultural topic (the mother as supreme), to the Igbo perception of white men. Slowly, the narrative shifts from describing their heritage and culture to detailing their interactions with white missionaries. However, Achebe shifts the storyline completely by introducing the white men as equivalent to destruction.

Before the Europeans came, the Igbo conception of “white men” was albinos. However, a new group of white colonizers had entered the area and wiped out a clan – the Abame. The man recounting the story says “We have heard stories about white men who made the powerful guns and the strong drinks and took slaves away across the seas, but no one thought the stories were true” (141). When the missionaries arrive, Okonkwo loses his eldest son to the Christian church and learns that,

...the white man had not only brought a religion but also a government. It was said that they had built a place of judgement in Umuofia to protect the followers of their religion.

It was even said that they had hanged one man who killed a missionary” (155).

By the end of part two, Achebe has shifted the narrative entirely from Igbo culture to the establishment of a white government and a seat of colonization. The reader understands that through the establishment of churches, the Europeans are able to get clans to turn against their own members, thereby weakening each clans’ potential to mount successful revolts.

Nonetheless, the brilliance of this shift lies in the aforementioned adage “history is written by the winners.” In effect, Achebe’s story reads like a history book. His focus on Igbo culture for the first hundred plus pages mimics the pre-colonial periods of all African tribes. Unfortunately, we already know that the development of distinct tribes was marred by colonial exploitation of national resources and human labor – just as they took over the history of Africa, they must take over the narrative of this story. Part two encapsulates the title: its subject is the moment in which *things fall apart*.

By the time Okonkwo can return to Umuofia, a central white government aims to control the actions of the people and it protects the church, which has already split the town in two by recruiting a large part of the Igbo population. When Okonkwo tries to rationalize the behavior of the white government, asking “does the white man understand our custom...?” (176), the response of one of Umuofia’s former warrior leaders sums up the colonization of Africa as a whole:

How can he when he does not even speak our tongue? But he says that our customs are bad; and our own brothers who have taken up his religion also say that our customs are bad. How do you think we can fight when our own brothers have turned against us? The white man is very clever. He came quietly and peaceably with his religion. We were amused at his foolishness and allowed him to stay. Now he has won our brothers, and our clan can no longer act like one. He has put a knife on the things that held us together and we have fallen apart (176).

This passage contains all the practices which colonizers used to destroy native culture: language, religion, and the imposition of Western cultural practices. Achebe uses part three to show the Igbo realizing the destruction they have brought upon themselves. As the section continues, the entire narrative is placed within the confines of a Westernized society, as Okonkwo must rebuild his home in a half-Christianized Umuofia with trade stores meant to lure the Igbo community with its riches. Instead of continuing as independent farmers and workers, the Igbo are lured into the Western community and by the end of the section, the narrative switches perspective.

Okonkwo is the embodiment of an Igbo warrior – he cannot exist in a tame, westernized environment which places no importance on physical independence, self-sufficiency, and loyalty to tradition. The colonizer's last move remains the subjugation of the Igbo leaders, so the white District Commissioner lures Okonkwo and the other leaders to an open discussion that leads to their arrest and imprisonment. The colonizers force the village to pay for the release of their leaders and, once free, Okonkwo and the others gather to discuss options for retaliation. Now that the white government has proven its capability to arrest the most important Igbo, its supremacy is complete. However, Okonkwo symbolizes Igbo heritage and culture; when the people of Umuofia accept their subjugation by refusing to go to war against the white government, Achebe must force the narrative of Igbo supremacy in Africa to end. Hence, Okonkwo commits suicide just as his own people subaltern-ized their own identity.

Mauritian audiences might recoil at the Igbo practices detailed in part one, but the respective lengths of all three parts, with part one being greater than both part two and three combined, reflects the history of Africa. African tribes and civilizations, regardless of Western revisionism, existed long before the white man conquered and carved up the continent. Colonization takes up a small part of Africa's history, therefore parts two and three are reflective

of that in their length. Depressingly, Achebe completes the reversal of fortunes – his story begins with the Igbo perspective of the successful warrior, Okonkwo, and it ends with Western perspective of the Her Majesty Queen Victoria’s successful Deputy Commissioner, who closes off the Igbo narrative with:

In the many years in which he had toiled to bring civilization to different parts of Africa he had learned a number of things. One of them was that a District Commissioner must never attend to such undignified details as cutting a hanged man from the tree...In the book which he planned to write he would stress that point. As he walked back to the court he thought...The story of this man who had...hanged himself would make interesting reading. One could almost write a whole chapter on him. Perhaps not a whole chapter but a reasonable paragraph, at any rate. There was so much else to include, and one must be firm in cutting out details. He had already chosen the title of the book, after much thought: *The Pacification of the Primitive Tribes of the Lower Niger*” (208-209).

However infuriating this last paragraph seems from the perspective of the postcolonial, it is simultaneously facetious and it illustrates how people, such as Mauritians, can rephrase their history. The commissioner thinks of “undignified details” and the “cutting out” of irrelevant points; however, Achebe made sure to give his readers the graphic and intense imagery of Igbo culture in the first part of the novel. In giving us Okonkwo’s story first, he has proven that his story “would make interesting reading” and his novel contradicts the colonial perspective that “not a whole chapter but a reasonable paragraph” would be enough. In fact, Achebe reverses roles with the colonizer by giving Igbo culture its historical due and by attributing the proportional “paragraph” to the colonial history of Africa as situated within centuries of pre-colonial rule.

Mauritius has a unique history of colonialism because there was no native population whose traditions were overturned by Europeans. However, reading Achebe's novel does question Mauritians on their origins – since the majority of the island's population was created through labor demands, do those individual populations (Chinese, Indian, African) know their roots? At this point, it would be interesting to do a study on the formation of a common Mauritian culture, because that study could show how the mix of Asian and African cultures came together. The farthest I can go here is that Mauritians share common knowledge on everyone's holidays, including Diwali, Eid, and Chinese New Year, and through that we also share knowledge on food, like Indian sweets, biryani, and nian gao ("Gato la cire"/ Mauritian wax cake). Personally, I know no Mauritians who have traced back their ancestry and have determined their roots, but for the sake of understanding the mix of cultures on the island, it could be useful for Mauritians to invest time in researching their culture to see what we have left behind.

Achebe's novel teaches us that progress can mean destroying roots and forgetting people, like the Deputy Commissioner who thinks of Okonkwo as just "a hanged man" when the reader knows he is much more than his suicide. How much have Mauritians forgotten? What were our roots? Have we kept them and incorporated them into our society, or has assimilation erased some of our history? I think it could be interesting to pair *Things Fall Apart* with Virahsawmy's *Flame Tree Lane* because the first questions the past and the second questions the future, but both remember the need to pay attention to our decisions in the moment for the sake of creating a better tomorrow.

## Conclusion

I began this project to explore Mauritian literature but also to connect to an identity with which I felt a tenuous link. Being from a country does not ensure an understanding of your origins; after all, immigrants can feel more tied to their adopted country than their original home. I thought that Mauritius' public education system mimicked this mixed sense of identity because it follows a British system, operates in a francophone society, and services a majority Indian-Mauritian population.

I intended to start with a section on Mauritian literature in order to frame the rest of the paper within a Mauritian context. However, I have found it difficult to define Mauritian literature: should it include literature written by non-Mauritians, like Bernardin de Saint-Pierre? Should I discuss literature unlikely to be read by the population? In the end, I decided that I needed to include Saint-Pierre's *Paul et Virginie* because of its impact on the tourism industry and its formation of Mauritius' island-life-fantasy. Reading through Dev Virahsawmy's piece, *Flame Tree Lane*, provided a slew of valid topics for discussion, particularly because his story focused infinitesimally on Mauritius' culture, politics, and economy. I believe it made a big difference in how I then read the ensuing CIE material, as Virahsawmy's goal revolved around universal topics, like money, progress, and self-preservation, easy to find in more widely-read literature.

Admittedly, I theorized that Shakespeare and Austen would be less important to a Mauritian conscious because they were produced by European authors who generally focused on their own population and not subaltern ones. Shakespeare's plays were definitely Eurocentric, but they do present valuable information on how stereotypes are presented, and subaltern communities must understand the way they may be portrayed in order to counter that. I see *The*

*Tragedy of Othello* as a wealth of information presenting the dangers of complete assimilation, and in retrospect, Othello would be a good comparison to Achebe's Okonkwo: two men committed suicide, one for his assimilated culture, the other for his traditional culture. By contrast, reading Jane Austen's *Mansfield Park* to find all the references to Sir Bartram's plantation felt like digging through a haystack. I realized that this sensation was the point – in postcolonial research, we need to pay attention to both the literature about us and the literature that excludes us because they reveal two perceptions of us. Austen's novel presents the reality that Europeans only cared about their colonial possessions inasmuch as they provided a source of income; their disregard for the people who worked or were owned by them represents the attitude of superiority which invaded colonial Europe before questions of ethic were finally brought to the forefront.

Reading Fugard and Achebe proves that works by and about subaltern cultures are refined and complex pieces of literature that merit global consideration. The two authors pursue questions on the lingering effects of colonialism upon which all formerly-colonized nations must reflect. Fugard attacks the idea of colonial education's attempt to devalue a population's culture through a South African teacher's relationship to one black student and one white student. The biggest lesson I learnt from his work is that we should subvert European works by analyzing through our subaltern perspective but also that enforcing our opinions on others, without justifying or situating them, only replaces colonial rhetoric with our own. Advancement can only be achieved through proper communication and consideration, a topic also explored by Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*. Achebe's work contests the issue of historical context, mimicked by the length of his three sections. He proves that pre-colonial African culture deserves respect and attention, despite the dramatic influence colonization had in rewriting history. His novel

prompted me to think about the mix of populations that form Mauritius, and I now believe that Mauritians should make an effort to understand where their roots come from and how their ancestral culture has affected the formation of Mauritius' current culture.

Were I to expand this research, I would include Nathacha Appanah's *Les Rochers de Poudre d'or* and *Le dernier Frère* because the former explores Mauritius' Indian diaspora and the latter expands upon a little-known aspect of the island's British colonial era. It may be true that Mauritians do not read a lot of her books, but many Mauritians have also not read *Paul et Virginie*. They only know the story because of the statues and tourist attractions related to the story. Besides, as Achebe and Fugard point out, we need to communicate more effectively in order to make our points heard, and both of Appanah's novels (written in French) drew attention in French literary circles while portraying Mauritius more accurately than Saint-Pierre.

This research changed my opinion on both Mauritian literature and the CIE syllabi. In trying to narrow down my options, I realized how vast literary categories can be because Mauritians have written novels, novellas, and poetry and they have written them in a variety of languages, including English, French, Hindi, and Kreol. Moreover, the CIE syllabi revealed itself to be applicable towards different perspectives, especially the idea that novels can express their society's tendency to brush over sensitive ethical questions.



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